

William Eggleston

Often referred to as the 'father of colour photography', William Eggleston was already experimenting with colour in the early 1960s, at a time when working in black-and-white was the norm for most of his peers. Using his home environment – Memphis and Mississippi – as his subject matter, William Eggleston became famous for monumentalizing everyday subjects in his large-format prints. In 1976, the Museum of Modern Art's groundbreaking one-man show entitled 'William Eggleston's Guide', established his reputation as a pioneer of modern colour photography.

William Eggleston, *UNTITLED, DUNKERQUE*, 2005

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When did you first get interested in photography?

A friend of mine who was really into photography made me buy my first camera – a Canon – when I was studying at Vanderbilt University in Nashville in 1957. I was fascinated immediately. At the time there weren't really any decent photographers that were published, so I pretty much taught myself. I started developing my own black-and-white pictures in a darkroom I made in my dorm room.

Do you think it's important to be technically proficient?

You become technically proficient whether you want to or not, the more you take pictures. To me it was obvious what I needed to learn.

What camera do you use?

I use all kinds of cameras, but mostly I use 35mm Leicas. Sometimes I use large format cameras, such as a 6x9 and up to 5x7 inches. But I don't think about what camera I should use that much. I just pick up the one that looks nicest on the day.

How often do you shoot these days?

All the time. I just go out and shoot. I don't really have any projects in mind, I just have a camera along wherever I go. I might be at a friend's house. It doesn't make any difference. I'll just shoot wherever I happen to be.

How do you decide if something is worthy of being captured?

I never know beforehand. Until I see it. It just happens all at once.

I take a picture very quickly and instantly forget about it. Not for good, but for the time being. Suddenly I just feel like I have to take a picture. Sometimes I'll leave the house with a fully loaded camera and end up with nothing. It's just about being there. Anywhere. Even the most uninteresting, ugly or boring places can for an instant become magical to me.

What goes through your mind when you are framing a shot?

Nothing really. It happens so fast. I compose very quickly and without thinking, but consciously. I take a picture instantly and never more than one. Sometimes I worry about the picture being out of focus, but I take that chance. A long time ago, I would have taken several shots of the same thing, but I realized that I could never decide which one was the best. I thought I was wasting a lot of time looking at these damn near identical pictures. I wanted to discipline myself to take only one picture of something, and if it didn't work out, that's just too bad. But it's pretty much always worked.

Do you think a photographer needs a philosophy to do good work?

I don't know how to answer that, but I suppose it must be there. Somewhere.

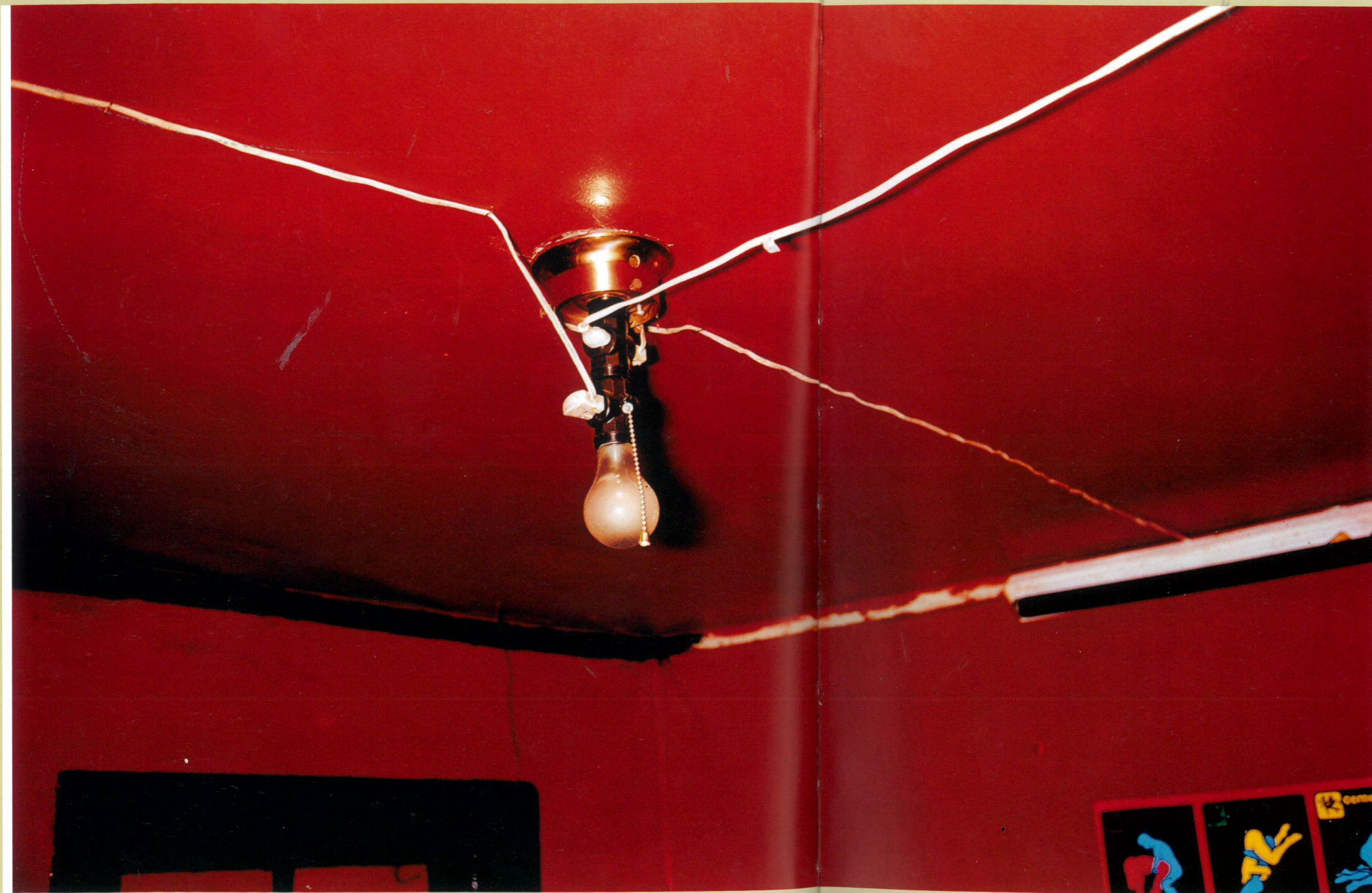
What would you like to elicit in the viewer?

If anything I would probably like the viewer to study the entire picture and everything that's in it, where



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it's placed, the composition. I would also hope that the image would register in the viewer's mind after seeing it in print. It's not even so much about remembering the image, but *seeing* it.

How did the historic Museum of Modern Art show come about?

A number of friends suggested I should show my work to John Szarkowski, at the time the curator of photography at the museum. So I called him right away when I was in New York and asked whether I could come by and show him some work. We formed a very close friendship over a long period of time. We worked together almost daily looking at pictures that I would bring with me. Over a period of years, we selected images out of thousands and it developed into an important show and book.

Did you have anyone to discuss your work with when you started out?

When I started in 1957 there really weren't any other photographers out there doing the kind of work I knew I wanted to do. My associates, people like Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, we all knew each other. We felt like a secret society that believed in each other. We never criticized each other's work, although we took extremely different kinds of pictures, we would just look at each

William Eggleston, *UNTITLED, GREENWOOD, MISSISSIPPI*, 1973



William Eggleston, *UNTITLED*,
NEAR JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI, c. 1970

other's work. I guess we all learnt and borrowed from each other – only with the best of intentions of course. It wasn't copying.

Do you think discussing work is a useful tool?

I used to have very little to say about other people's work. There's almost nothing to say. I just like looking. I've never been able to do that about my own work or other people's, at least not verbally. I've just been asked to write an introduction to Andreas Gursky's book. I respect his work immensely, but I just don't know where to begin. I don't feel I can comment on it. I feel like I get my point across without speaking, especially when I'm showing things of mine to people I respect. Lee Friedlander and I for example, have a connection like that.

Where do you get your inspiration?

I don't really look at other people's photographs at all. It takes enough time to look at my own. Occasionally, I might look at a book, but I have a great love of music. I play and compose. I'm not sure I can say it inspires my photography. However, the fact that I work in groups of pictures, sometimes very large groups of pictures, is perhaps an indication that I wish to create a flow with my images equivalent to that of a fine piece of music.

What makes one image stand out more than another?

I don't have favourites. I look at

pictures democratically. To me they are all equal. There are still so many pictures that I wish were seen, but that have never had the chance.

And then there are some pictures that have become very well-known, which I never picked as favourites. For example, the picture of the red ceiling. That wasn't taken with anything in mind. I was actually lying on a bed with a friend of mine, who had this queer habit of painting different rooms in different colours. And we were just lying there on the bed with his wife talking and I looked up and there was this lightbulb and this red everywhere and I instantly took the picture. It doesn't bother me one bit if other people choose a selection when putting a book or an exhibition together. I usually let them do it. I don't even give guidelines. But they are usually people I have come to respect and know. People like Thomas Weski and John Szarkowski.

How do you find your subjects, such as the woman with the red hair or the blue jacket hanging in an isolated room?

The red-headed woman was a complete stranger. I was just walking by and I took her picture and then kept walking. It was taken in the Gulf of Mexico. I wish I had met her because she's so beautiful, but I left too fast and never went back. Often I take pictures while I'm in the process of moving, either



William Eggleston, *UNTITLED (BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI)*, 1974

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William Eggleston, *UNTITLED (HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA)*, 1972

walking, or driving. It's just a split second during a particular voyage.

The blue jacket I took in central Mississippi. This friend of mine took me out to a place where several families lived all together in this very humble house that was torn down once a year and then rebuilt using really cheap materials, like cardboard etc. I was just wandering around. I'd never been there before. They were strangers to me but they didn't mind my being there. I saw that picture and took it instantly, with a flash, because it was dark in there, then I carried on roaming around the other rooms.

What about the man sitting in the motel room or the old man who is showing you his gun?

The motel room picture came about when I was invited by the US Navy to do an inspection tour of the Nasa Space base. I'm not sure they knew I was a photographer, but I had my camera. After a day of touring the place where they built rockets, a group of us went back to this hotel and I just walked down the corridor and I happened to know this man and I walked in and instantly took a picture and left. He was just sitting at the end of the day, relaxing, fixing himself a cocktail.

The old man and his gun was taken in this tiny town, where a distant relative of my wife's lived. The man used to be the night watchman of the town and he

would stroll around and keep the peace. He showed me the gun he carried on him. He was retired, but he told me various stories about incidents. Right before I took that photograph he showed me bullet wounds. The picture was taken in his house, on his bed.

Do you think you can learn a way of seeing?

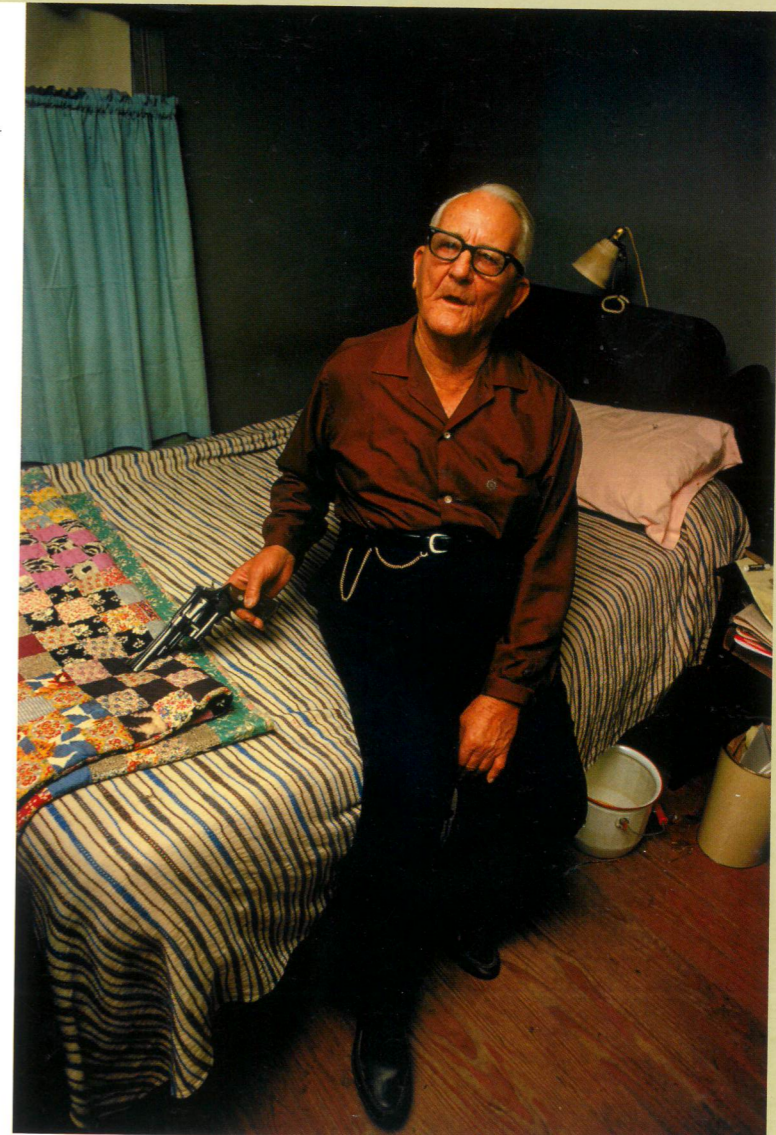
I grew up playing the piano from a very young age. I was self-taught. I have an ear for it and can play things whether I have the notes in front of me or not. The same goes for photography, it's either in you or it's not. You can't really learn it.

Did any photographers inspire you?

Yes. The first one I felt had any sense was Cartier-Bresson. They'd just published a book of his when I was at college and I started looking at it and comparing it to a few other people I knew at the time. I thought it was the only thing that had art about it. I could tell that he was familiar with Degas, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec. It was reflected in his compositions.

When does something become art?

Whether it's Kandinsky, who is my favourite painter or Bach, who I have studied a great deal – when something is original it makes sense. Bach never repeats himself. I could say that about Kandinsky and Klee too. But take music. It's not just entertainment. There's a difference between entertainment and learning. If I look intense when



William Eggleston, *UNTITLED (MORTON, MISSISSIPPI)*, c. 1972

I'm listening to music, it hopefully means I'm learning something.

What excites you most about photography?

Probably the fact that I want to, and know that I can, take pictures that no one else has taken before. I certainly don't think about what other people might think looking at them. It's more about what I'm going to think myself when I look at them. When someone asked him why he took pictures, my old friend Garry Winogrand said, 'Because I want to see what something looks like when it's photographed.' I've never been able to top that quote. I feel the same way.

Do you ever shoot on assignment?

I'm not against assignments. Often they are projects I would never have thought of myself, or challenges, and I like to see how they will work out. I've just been commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine* to photograph a bird, known as the Ivory-billed woodpecker, which was thought to be extinct for years. I've never shot a bird before and we don't even know whether we'll find it or not. Nobody has seen it in a thousand years.

What about commercial work?

I try to get out of it politely. I'm just not interested.

What advice would you give a budding photographer?

Keep trying. I would also tell them, frankly [he laughs], to look at my pictures.



William Eggleston, UNTITLED (MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE), c. 1975

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